

Town of Sea Isle City
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Intersection of County Road Nos. 625 and 619
Sea Isle City
Cape May County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1044

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF SEA ISLE CITY

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Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Intersection of County Road Nos. 625 and 619, Sea Isle City, Cape May Barrier Island, Cape May County, New Jersey.

Significance: Sea Isle City is significant as a speculative resort development made possible by the arrival of the West Jersey and Seashore railroad in 1882.

History: Prior to resort settlement, the island where Sea Isle City is now located was known as Ludlam's Island, taking its name from one of Cape May County's earliest settlers, Joseph Ludlam. The island remained relatively unpopulated, with only a few "beach houses," two life saving stations, and a lighthouse being built before the coming of the railroad instigated the resort building boom. In 1880, Charles Landis, who had already founded Vineland, purchased Ludlam Island, and began planning Sea Isle City. He envisioned a town patterned after Venice, complete with canals and classical statuary, accentuating the community's maritime setting.¹ Although Landis' plan was never realized, the Sea Isle City Improvement Company was able to attract a substantial population. An 1881 map of "Sea Isle City, Ludlam Island, New Jersey" advertising 5,405 surveyed lots, showed that the majority of beachfront lots, as well as some further inland along Railroad Avenue, south of the railroad tracks, had already been purchased.²

The first rail service to Sea Isle was provided in 1882 by the Ocean City Railroad Company, which ran a 4.8 mile line from the West Jersey Railroad's main Cape May line, joining it as South Seaville. In 1896, the Ocean City Railroad Company was absorbed by the West Jersey and Seashore Railroad, followed in 1893, by the South Jersey Railroad, which offered service from Philadelphia through Winslow Junction. A local donkey-pulled trolley service, later replaced by a steam locomotive, was offered beginning in 1887, between Sea Isle City and Townsend's Inlet.

Chief Engineer H. Farrand's report on the property suggested a profitable future.

With proper railroad facilities, and lots offered at a reasonable price, I do not see why this place should not become as great a resort as Atlantic City, by reason of its proximity to Philadelphia, and the character of the beach...The West Jersey Railroad can make the same time to Sea Isle City from Philadelphia, as to Atlantic City."³

¹ June Methot, Up and Down the Beach (Navesink, NJ: Whip Publishers, 1988.), 112; Herbert M. Beitel and Vance C. Enck, Cape May County: A Pictorial History (Norfolk: Donning Company, 1988), 194.

² "Sea Isle City, Ludlam Island, New Jersey," South Jersey Magazine 19 (Summer 1990), 30-35.

³ Sea Isle City, Ludlam Island, New Jersey," 34.

Though the resort never reached Atlantic City proportions, the proliferation of local hotels throughout the 1880s and 1890s illustrates a significant resort trade. One of the earliest hotels, the Excursion house, was built by Landis's company in 1882. Complete with stores, a skating rink and a public second floor terrace, the Excursion house formed the social center of the growing town. By 1889, the Continental Hotel subsumed this role, at least in terms of size and fashion. One of the largest hotels on the shore, the Continental's five stories were reached by the only steam-operated elevator in Cape May County.⁴ The hotel was never very financially successful, and stood vacant for eight years before being demolished in 1921.⁵ An 1891 history of the area reported thirty hotels, all receiving electricity and good water.⁶

The first of a series of boardwalks was constructed in 1907, each wiped out by a storm, finally being replaced in 1963 with a paved promenade.⁷ According to one historian, Sea Isle City was the first shore resort to provide "Excursion Houses" for itinerant "Shoobies" and other summer visitors. Like the famous Excursion House Hotel, these "grandstands facing the beach" provided a places for various social events and spectacles, such as horse racing.⁸ Beginning in 1905, Sea Isle City residents could join the newly formed Sea Isle Yacht and Motor Club.⁹ A decade later, the trolley line, running parallel to the sea, became a wide avenue, extending through Strathmere and into Ocean City to the north and into Avalon on the south.

Throughout the twentieth century, both Sea Isle City and Strathmere to the north, have suffered from the effects of coastal storms. Known as "the city that refuses to quit," Sea Isle recovered from three severe storms between 1944 and 1962.¹⁰ The "Nor-easter" storm of 1962 caused much destruction on Ludlam's Island. Much of Sea Isle City, and neighboring Strathmere, was washed away by floods and subsequently rebuilt. A more recent storm in the fall of 1991 washed away the foundations of homes and flooded most of the island, reminding off-season residents of the constant threat to their resort-based economy. Today, Sea Isle City's successful rebuilding effort is illustrated by the towering Spinnaker condominium complex, Italian restaurants and other developments near the boardwalk. Though the downtown attracts tourists with flashy signs, clubs and even a few seasonal amusements, the edges of the city remain relatively quiet. The tightly packed neighborhoods

⁴ Walter M. Sawn, "Sea Isle City, New Jersey, a History" (n.p., 1964), 19.

⁵ Methot. 112; Sawn, 17-19.

⁶ Beitel and Enck, 195.

⁷ Sawn. 26; Beitel and Enck. 197.

⁸ Beitel and Enck, 195.

⁹ Beitel and Enck, 198.

¹⁰ Beitel and Enck, 198.

incorporate corner markets and laundries. As the growing number of condominiums near the water suggest, an increasing number of people add to the excitement in Sea Isle during the summer.

Prepared by: Camille Gatza
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- Sources: Beitel, Herbert M. and Enck, Vance C. Cape May County: A Pictorial History. Norfolk: The Donning Company, 1988.
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- Sebold, Kimberly, and Sara Amy Leach. Historic Themes and Resources within the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail: Southern New Jersey and the Delaware Bay. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Interior, 1991.

Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatza (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.